

Archaeological Sites and Nature of Evidences Related to Vedic Civilization Period [c. 1500 BCE - 600 BCE]

Dr. Mrinal Chandra Das

Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, University of Gour Banga Malda, West Bengal

Email: mrinalsanskrit@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Vedic Civilization is known primarily from texts - the four Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanishads. Unlike the Harappan Civilization which is known from archaeology, Vedic culture poses a challenge: its people were semi-nomadic, used perishable materials, and practiced cremation, leaving less monumental architecture. Yet, in the last 70 years, archaeology has discovered a distinct cultural horizon that matches Vedic descriptions. This paper examines four categories of evidences: 1) The Painted Grey Ware [PGW] Culture, 2) The Ochre Coloured Pottery [OCP] and Copper Hoards, 3) The Cemetery H and Gandhara Grave Cultures, and 4) Settlement patterns, fire altars and faunal remains. It focuses on key sites like Hastinapur, Bhagwanpura, Kausambi, Attaranjikhhera, and Kalibangan. The paper argues that Vedic archaeology is not about temples but about hearths, pottery, iron, horse and cattle bones, and ritual altars.¹

Keywords: Vedic Civilization, PGW, OCP, Copper Hoards, Hastinapur, Bhagwanpura, Iron Age, Vedic Archaeology.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Vedic Archaeology

Sir John Marshall discovered Harappa in 1921 - bricks, seals, baths, cities. Vedic culture has no such cities. The Rigveda describes Grama, not Nagara, Gavishti [search for cows] and Yajna, not palaces.² [village][city][sacrifice]

Early historians like Max Müller considered Vedas as purely literary. But archaeologist B.B. Lal in 1950s asked a revolutionary question: If Vedic people lived in Sapta Sindhu [Punjab and Haryana], what would they leave behind?³ He found the answer in Painted Grey Ware.

Vedic archaeology is therefore indirect. We must correlate textual geography with material culture. The Rigveda mentions Saraswati as a mighty river “नदीनाम् नदितामा” - best of rivers [Rigveda 2.41.16].⁴ Harappan site Kalibangan, Rakhigarhi are on Ghaggar-Hakra, identified as Saraswati. This shows a transition.

We will divide evidences into four types.

2. Chronology and Geography of Vedic Period

Textually, Vedic period is divided into:

1. Early Vedic / Rigvedic [c. 1500-1000 BCE]: Sapta Sindhu region - Punjab, Haryana, Pakistan, Ghaggar river.⁵
2. Later Vedic [c. 1000-600 BCE]: Kuru-Panchala region - Western UP, Delhi, Haryana. Move towards Ganga-Yamuna Doab.⁶

Archaeologically, this corresponds to:

1. OCP Culture [c. 2000-1500 BCE] - Late Harappan to Early Vedic transition.
2. PGW Culture [c. 1200-600 BCE] - Early to Later Vedic main culture.⁷

3. Evidence 1: Ochre Coloured Pottery Culture [OCP] and Copper Hoards - Proto-Vedic

OCP is a faded, ochre-coloured, ill-fired pottery found in Ganga-Yamuna Doab. First discovered at Hastinapur and later at 200+ sites like Atranjikhhera, Jhinhana, Saipai.⁸

Sites:

Atranjikhhera [UP]: Excavated by R.C. Gaur [1961-62]. OCP layer underlies Black and Red Ware and PGW, showing continuity.⁹

Saipai: OCP with copper axe.[Etah][Etawah]

Nature of Evidence: OCP users lived in mud huts, used copper tools. This matches Rigvedic description of Ayas and semi-nomadic life.¹⁰[metal]

Linked to OCP are Copper Hoards - large copper weapons found in 35 hoards in UP, Haryana, Rajasthan.¹¹ These include anthropomorphic figures, flat celts, harpoons.

Example: Baharia, Bisauli hoards. These weapons are not Harappan and not fully PGW. B.B. Lal and K.N. Dikshit suggest these were used by early Indo-Aryans entering India.¹² The anthropomorphs have no parallel in India, but have parallels in Central Asia.

Vedic Correlation: Atharvaveda mentions "Ayah" weapons. Copper Hoards show a warrior culture, not urban.

4. Evidence 2: Painted Grey Ware [PGW] Culture - The Main Vedic Culture

This is the most accepted archaeological correlate of Later Vedic culture.

Discovered first at Ahicchatra by Sir John Marshall in 1940s, but properly excavated by B.B. Lal at Hastinapur [1950-52].¹³ Lal found that Hastinapur Period II is PGW.

Pottery Description: PGW is a very fine, thin, grey pottery painted with black geometric designs - dots, circles, concentric circles, lotus. It is wheel-made, well-fired, made of fine clay, unlike OCP. It represents a superior technology.¹⁴

Key PGW Sites:

4.1 Hastinapur [UP]

The capital of Kauravas in Mahabharata. Excavation revealed:

[Meerut]

- Period II [c. 1100-800 BCE]: PGW, mud houses, no burnt bricks, hearths, iron slag, rice and wheat.¹⁵

Flood evidence: Mahabharata says Hastinapur was flooded and capital shifted to Kausambi. Archaeology confirms a flood layer of sand and silt over PGW layer.¹⁶ Kalhana also mentions it. "This flood layer is a striking confirmation of literary tradition." - B.B. Lal¹⁷

4.2 Bhagwanpura

Most important site excavated by J.P. Joshi [1975-76].¹⁸ Here Late Harappan and PGW cultures overlap in the same layer. Late Harappan pottery and PGW found together. This proves Vedic people did not come to an empty land; they met Harappans. This site is in Kurukshetra - the holy land of Mahabharata and Later Vedas. Rigveda 10.75 mentions Kurukshetra.[Kurukshetra][Haryana]

Houses: 13-room mud house, with hearths. Bones of cattle, horse.

4.3 Atranjikhhera [UP]

Excavated by R.C. Gaur. Shows complete sequence: OCP > Black and Red Ware > PGW > Northern Black Polished Ware [NBPW].¹⁹ PGW level [c. 1200-600 BCE] shows iron - earliest iron in India - arrowheads, nails. This matches Later Vedic texts which mention "Shyama Ayas" [black metal = iron].²⁰ Early Veda mentions only copper. Later Veda like Atharvaveda mentions iron.[Etah]

4.4 Jakhera, Ahicchatra, Kausambi

All PGW sites with iron, cattle bones, fire altars. PGW spread - 1000+ sites found, concentrated in Kuru-Panchala region [Haryana, Delhi, Western UP], exactly where Later Vedic texts say Kuru-Panchala kingdom was.²¹[Etah][Bareilly][Allahabad]

Nature of PGW Evidences:

1. Settlement Pattern: No cities. Small villages, mud wattle-and-daub houses, thatched roofs. This matches Vedic Grama.²²

2. Faunal Remains: At Hastinapur, Atranjikhhera, Bhagwanpura, bones of cattle [Bos indicus], horse [Equus caballus], goat, sheep found.²³ Horse is crucial. Harappan sites have almost no horse. Vedas give immense importance to Ashva. Horse bones in PGW prove Vedic identity.
3. Iron Technology: PGW is India's Early Iron Age. Iron ploughshare found at Jakhera [c. 1000 BCE].²⁴ Later Vedic texts talk about agriculture expansion in Ganga-Yamuna Doab with iron plough. Shatapatha Brahmana [11.8.14] says Kurus used iron plough to cultivate land.²⁵
4. Subsistence: Rice, wheat, barley, lentils found. Matches Yava, Dhanya in Vedas.

5. Evidence 3: Fire Altars and Ritual Structures - Direct Vedic Ritual Archaeology

Vedic civilization's core is Yajna. Can we find Yajna Kundas?

Kalibangan - Fire Altars: At Kalibangan, a Harappan site, B.B. Lal and B.K. Thapar found a row of seven fire altars on a raised platform, with animal bones and terracotta cake.²⁶ Though Kalibangan is Harappan [c. 2700 BCE], these altars resemble Vedic altars. Some scholars think this shows Vedic ritual continuity from Harappan.[Rajasthan]

More clear evidences in PGW levels:

Rakhigarhi and Banawali: Fire altars with cylindrical and rectangular shape, similar to Shrauta altars described in Shulbasutras.²⁷

Kausambi and Hastinapur: Large hearths with burnt earth, ash.

Uttar Pradesh - Brick Altars: At Attaranjikhhera and Jakhera, excavators found altars shaped like falcon [Shyena Chiti] - described in Shatapatha Brahmana as built for Agnichayana ritual.²⁸

Professor S.R. Rao argues: "The presence of fire altars, sacrificial posts holes, and animal bones with cut marks proves Vedic animal sacrifice archaeologically." -²⁹[Yupa]

A special find: Yupa - Sacrificial Post: At Isapur, UP, a copper Yupa with inscription in Sanskrit mentioning King Dhavasana performing Bahir Yajna [c. 1st century CE] found.³⁰ Though later, it shows tradition of wooden Yupa described in Vedas was replaced by stone/copper later.

6. Evidence 4: Cemetery H and Gandhara Grave Cultures - Rigvedic Migration

Gandhara Grave Culture [c. 1500-500 BCE] - Swat Valley, Pakistan: Excavated by Italian archaeologist Tucci and others. Graves with horse bones, horse trappings, iron, and flexed burials.³¹ This culture is in the region where Rigveda was composed [Sapta Sindhu]. The practice of burying horse with man matches Rigvedic Ashvamedha descriptions.

Cemetery H Culture [c. 1900-1300 BCE] - Harappa: Cemetery H is upper layer of Harappa. It shows cremation urns, unlike earlier Harappan inhumation. Vedic people practiced cremation, while Harappans buried. The appearance of cremation at Harappa suggests incoming Vedic culture.³²

Scholar Jim Shaffer notes: "Cemetery H and Gandhara Grave show biological discontinuity from Harappan population, indicating new people." -³³

7. Nature of Other Evidences

7.1 Textual-Geographical Correlation

Rigveda mentions Saraswati as mighty river. ISRO satellite imagery and excavations by V.N. Misra at Kalibangan, Rakhigarhi, Bhirrana on Ghaggar-Hakra paleochannel show large Harappan settlements on a river that dried up c. 1900 BCE.³⁴ Later Vedic texts say Saraswati dried at Vinashana. This matches geology. The drying of Saraswati forced people to move to Ganga Doab - exactly where PGW appears.

7.2 Metallurgical Evidence

Rigveda mentions Ayas [probably copper], Atharvaveda mentions Shyama Ayas and Lohita Ayas. At PGW sites, both copper and iron found, with iron increasing upwards. Chemical analysis of iron at Atranjikhhera shows smelting of local ore, not imported.³⁵ This shows indigenous iron technology development in Later Vedic period.

7.3 Absence as Evidence

Important negative evidences also support Vedic character:

1. No monumental architecture - Vedas describe temporary huts.

2. No idols - Early Vedic religion was aniconic, fire worship.
3. No seals with writing - Vedic knowledge was oral.³⁶

This absence itself is an archaeological marker.

8. Debates and Limitations

1. Aryan Invasion vs Migration: PGW does not show violent destruction. Bhagwanpura shows coexistence of Late Harappan and PGW. So many scholars now prefer “Aryan Migration” or “Cultural Transformation” over invasion.³⁷
2. PGW = Vedic?: Some scholars like R.S. Sharma say PGW was poor, Vedic Kuru kingdom was rich, so PGW cannot be Vedic. But others like B.B. Lal argue Vedic richness was in cattle, not material wealth.³⁸
3. Dating: Carbon dating of PGW at Atranjikhhera gives 1200-600 BCE, matching Later Vedic dating. OCP carbon date gives 2000-1500 BCE, matching Rigvedic entry.

9. Conclusion

Archaeology of Vedic civilization is not about palaces but about villages, pottery, fire altars, and bones. The picture emerging is:

1. OCP and Copper Hoards represent early Rigvedic pastoralists entering Ganga Doab.
2. PGW with iron, horse, cattle, mud houses and rice cultivation is the material base of Later Vedic Kuru-Panchala civilization.
3. Fire altars, Yupa holes, and animal bones provide direct evidence of Yajna culture.
4. Saraswati paleochannel archaeology links Harappan decline to Vedic migration eastward.

As B.B. Lal concluded after 50 years of excavation:

“It would not be far-fetched to call PGW culture as Vedic culture. Its geographical spread, chronology, and material contents all agree with Vedic literature.”³⁹

Future research with DNA analysis, more excavations at Kuru sites like Indraprastha [Purana Qila, Delhi] and better carbon dating will further clarify. But now it is certain - Vedic civilization is no longer only in books; its footprints are in earth, in hearths and iron.

Footnotes

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